

# How Successful People Think

*Change Your Thinking, Change Your Life*

John C. Maxwell

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## Introduction

In all aspects of life, from the professional world to family interactions, good thinkers help solve problems. For 40 years, John C. Maxwell has studied and analyzed successful people and how they think. He has concluded that the way successful people approach the thought process is a key differentiator. In **How Successful People Think**, Maxwell discusses the 11 skills that good thinkers exhibit and describes how to adopt these skills.

### Getting Started with Better Thinking

For a person to change the way they think, they must commit time to an ongoing process that is comprised of six steps:

1. *Finding good input to start the thinking process.* The thinking process can be initiated by absorbing good ideas from books, trade magazines, or lectures. When an idea catches one's attention, Maxwell recommends keeping it in a place where it will stimulate further thinking.
2. *Spending time with good thinkers.* Maxwell believes that to become a sharp thinker, a person must spend time with sharp people and observe how they think.
3. *Thinking good thoughts.* The thinking process is a discipline. As a result, it is important to make thinking a priority and to regularly take time to generate and develop thoughts.
4. *Acting on good thoughts.* The window of opportunity to act on promising thoughts is short. When a good thought arises, it is important to act on it quickly.
5. *Allowing emotions to create another good thought.* A person cannot wait to start the thinking pro

cess until they feel like it; they must proactively engage in thinking.

6. *Repeating the process.* To continuously generate good thoughts, it is necessary to repeat the thinking process over and over again.

Maxwell has found that it is useful to have a designated place to think, shape, stretch, and land one's thoughts. To shape a thought, a person must scrutinize it and fine tune it. Landing a thought occurs when it moves from abstraction to application. This requires buy-in from key influencers in an organization, as well as those people who will be most affected.

## Big Picture Thinking

A big picture perspective brings a level of maturity to an individual's thinking. Maxwell has found that big picture thinkers tend to learn continually, listen intentionally, look expansively, and live completely. Through lifelong learning, big picture thinkers are able to connect ideas that appear at first glance to be unrelated to one another.

Big picture thinking is beneficial for people who want to become leaders. Good leaders are able to create a compelling vision, map a path for attaining that vision, and seize the right moment to proceed. Big picture thinking also keeps tasks on target. When activities are viewed in the context of the big picture, it is possible to see what the right tasks are to attack next. Maxwell believes that big picture thinkers are better able to see things from other people's point of view and are also better able to work in a team. He states that seeing the big picture is the only way for a person or organization to move into unfamiliar territory.

Big picture thinkers exhibit the following traits:

- *They do not require certainty.* When dealing with complicated ideas, it is necessary to accept some degree of ambiguity.
- *They learn from every experience.* It is essential to learn from both successes and failures.
- *They gain insight from many different people.* Important insights can be gained from customers, employees, co-workers, and company leaders.

- *They are not afraid to expand their world.* Although

## Key Concepts

In **How Successful People Think**, John C. Maxwell discusses the thought processes used by successful individuals and describes how these techniques can be learned. He outlines the 11 types of thinking and the important skills attributed to each. People succeed by:

1. Seeing the wisdom of big-picture thinking
2. Unleashing the potential of focused thinking
3. Discovering the joy of creative thinking
4. Recognizing the importance of realistic thinking
5. Releasing the power of strategic thinking
6. Feeling the energy of possibility thinking
7. Embracing the lessons of reflective thinking
8. Questioning the acceptance of popular thinking
9. Encouraging the participation of shared thinking
10. Experiencing the satisfaction of unselfish thinking
11. Enjoying the returns associated with bottom-line thinking



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most people are satisfied with the status quo, big picture thinking requires people to go beyond what is commonplace.

## Focused Thinking

Focused thinking allows a person to think clearly about a problem. This skill helps individuals direct energy toward a specific objective, bring more clarity to issues, and take ideas to the next level. When engaging in focused thinking, Maxwell recommends selecting challenges or areas that are most likely to have a large payoff. There are five ways that people can improve their focused thinking:

1. *Eliminate distractions.* To focus on areas that will provide the greatest return, it is necessary to remove distractions.
2. *Make time.* Although multi-tasking is popular in today's world, it is not conducive to focused thinking. People must devote time exclusively to focused thinking.
3. *Keep items of focus in view.* To concentrate on things that matter, Maxwell suggests keeping important items of focus in immediate view.
4. *Set goals.* When clear objectives exist, it is easy for the mind to focus.
5. *Question progress.* Periodically monitor whether progress has been made. Progress is the best measure of whether focused thinking is working well.

## Creative Thinking

Creative thinking is an important part of how successful individuals think, but few people possess this skill. Creative thinkers value ideas, enjoy exploring options, embrace ambiguity, celebrate the offbeat, connect what is seemingly unconnected, and do not fear failure. Creative thinking is valuable because it results in a large number of ideas for consideration. People who are always seeking new ideas tend to learn more. Maxwell defines creativity as intelligence having fun. Through his research, Maxwell has found five ways to stimulate creativity:

1. *Avoid "creativity killers."* Creativity killers are people who are comfortable with the status quo and do not embrace new ideas. When an individual has a great idea, they must not let anyone dissuade them. If people and organizations continue to do the same things repeatedly, it is not possible to pursue anything new and exciting.
2. *Ask the right questions.* To think creatively and to challenge the status quo, it is necessary to ask good questions.
3. *Develop a creative environment.* While negative environments destroy great ideas, creative environments are like greenhouses where great ideas are cultivated. In these places, there is a focus on innovation, a high degree of trust among team members, and appreciation for the power of a dream.
4. *Spend time with creative people.* One way to counteract a negative environment is to spend time with creative people. Maxwell notes that creati

*As you get older and more experienced, the need to focus becomes more critical.  
The farther and higher you go, the more focused you can be – and need to be.*

# About the Author

**John C. Maxwell** is an internationally recognized leadership expert, speaker, coach, and author who has sold over 19 million books. Dr. Maxwell is the founder of EQUIP and the John Maxwell Company, organizations that have trained more than 5 million leaders worldwide. Every year he speaks to *Fortune* 500 companies, international government leaders, and organizations as diverse as the United States Military Academy at West Point and the National Football League. A *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Business Week* best-selling author, Maxwell has written three books which have each sold more than one million copies: *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, *Developing the Leader Within You*, and *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader*. You can find him at [JohnMaxwell.com](http://JohnMaxwell.com) and follow him at [Twitter.com/JohnCMaxwell](https://twitter.com/JohnCMaxwell). How Successful People Think John C. Maxwell Business Book Summaries® March 3, 2011 • Copyright © 2011 EBSCO Publishing Inc. • All Rights Reserved Page 4

ity tends to be contagious.

5. *Get out of "the box."* It is easy to get stuck in the same routines. One of the best ways to avoid this is to seek out new paradigms through travel or reading about new subjects.

## Realistic Thinking

Realistic thinking is absolutely essential for success in business. It minimizes downside risk by determining in advance what the consequences of different actions might be. By acknowledging consequences, it is possible to plan for them. By developing contingency plans, individuals and teams feel more secure. Realistic thinking also leads people to better define their targets and create a plan for achieving those targets. Through realistic thinking, it is possible to create a concrete foundation upon which ideas can be built upon.

To improve one's realistic thinking abilities, Maxwell suggests five tips:

1. *Develop an appreciation for truth.* Realistic thinking requires people to face the truth and to deal with its consequences.
2. *Gather the facts.* An important part of realistic thinking is gathering the facts related to an idea. It also can be useful to research what others have done in similar situations.
3. *Think about the pros and cons.* When individuals analyze the pros and cons associated with an idea, they gain a more thorough and realistic viewpoint.
4. *Envision the worst case scenario.* One of the most useful parts of realistic thinking is to uncover, envision, and analyze the worst case scenario associated with an idea.
5. *Align resources with objectives.* After analyzing the pros and cons and identifying the worst case scenario, it will be possible to identify gaps between reality and one's vision. After the gaps are identified, Maxwell recommends using available resources to fill them.

## Strategic Thinking

Strategic thinking enables individuals to take a long-term view of a situation. This type of thinking has numerous benefits: it can simplify ideas by breaking them down into manageable pieces, and it also leads to more precise thinking, since people must move beyond a vague idea and identify specific ways to address the issue. By aligning actions with objectives, strategic thinking improves the odds that a person is going in the right direction.

There are seven steps associated with strategic thinking:

1. *Break down the issue.* To focus on issues most effectively, it is necessary to first break them down into smaller parts that are more manageable.
2. *Ask why before how.* Rather than jumping into problem-solving mode, try to identify all the issues first.
3. *Identify the real issues and objectives.* Ask probing questions to uncover the real issues. Often the solution to a problem is simple after the real issues have been identified.
4. *Review the available resources.* A strategy must consider what resources are available. If this is overlooked, the strategy will fail.

5. *Develop a plan.* Maxwell believes that the best way to plan is to start with the obvious. Obvious elements tend to initiate mental momentum.

6. *Put the right people in the right place.* The people aspect of any issue must be addressed as part of the strategic thinking process.

7. *Repeat the process.* To use strategic thinking most effectively, individuals must endeavor to continuously engage in strategic thinking.

## Possibility Thinking

Possibility thinkers believe that solutions exist to even the most difficult problems. When a person believes something challenging can be done and then succeeds

*Today, I encourage my key leaders to think realistically. We make realistic thinking the foundation of our business because we derive certainty and security from it.*How

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at doing it, doors open for that person and others are attracted to them. When possibility thinkers make things happen, it inspires others to create possibilities. By approaching a difficult task, the potential to attain exceptional results is uncovered. People who embrace possibility thinking believe in what they are doing and are energized by it.

Maxwell recommends six different ways to stimulate possibility thinking:

1. *Do not focus on the impossibilities.* Possibility thinkers do not search for or focus on the problems in any situation.
2. *Stay away from experts.* The author believes that experts all too often discourage people's dreams. Rather than relying on experts' advice, it is better to give oneself permission to believe that a solution is possible.
3. *Look for possibilities in every situation.* Regardless of the circumstances, try to look for positive possibilities.
4. *Dream bigger.* To encourage possibility thinking, try to dream one size bigger than usual. By dreaming more expansively, people are forced to grow.
5. *Question the status quo.* It is impossible to stay the same and also improve. Greater possibilities mean that people cannot settle for the status quo.
6. *Find inspiration from great achievers.* One way to learn more about possibility thinking is to study great achievers.

## Reflective Thinking

Although today's fast-paced society does not encourage reflective thinking, this practice can help people learn from past experiences and identify what should be repeated and what should change. There are many benefits associated with reflective thinking: it provides people with true perspective, lends emotional integrity to thinking, clarifies situations, and increases a person's confidence in decision making. One of the most important aspects of reflective thinking is its ability to transform an experience into insight.

There are five ways to improve one's ability to think in a reflective manner:

1. *Set aside time for reflection.* Without dedicating time for reflective thinking, people are unlikely to engage in this practice.
2. *Avoid distractions.* Reflection requires a place that provides solitude and an escape from interruptions.
3. *Regularly review one's calendar or journal.* Although calendars are a useful planning tool, they are also good to use during reflective thinking to show how activities align with priorities.
4. *Ask the right questions.* Much of the value that is derived from reflective thinking comes from the questions that a person asks.
5. *Cement learning through action.* People must be intentional about putting thoughts into action. For example, Maxwell recommends attending a conference, reflecting on what was presented, and then putting it into action.

## Popular Thinking

Questioning popular thinking can be challenging, but there are valid reasons for doing so. When people follow a trend, they usually do not give it much thought. Although many view popular thinking as a source of safety and security, Maxwell points out that there is a large difference between acceptance and intelligence. Because popular thinking favors the status quo, it discourages innovation and brings average results. He suggests five different ways to question the acceptance of popular thinking:

1. *Think before following.* It is necessary to consider what is best, rather than what is popular. To challenge popular thinking means going outside the norm. However, this unorthodox behavior often holds the seeds of vision and opportunity.
2. *Appreciate different types of thinking.* By appreciating the ways that other people think, it is possible to embrace innovation and change. It is useful to

*If you embrace possibility thinking, your dreams will go from molehill to mountain size, and because you believe in possibilities, you put yourself in position to achieve them.* How Successful People Think John C. Maxwell Business Book Summaries® March 3, 2011 • Copyright © 2011 EBSCO



spend time with people who think differently.

3. *Question one's own way of thinking.* It is a major temptation to return to a way of thinking that once worked well, even if it is no longer effective. Maxwell notes that today's success can often be the enemy to tomorrow's success.
4. *Try new things in new ways.* To get out of a rut, innovate in small, everyday ways. Unconventional thinking questions the way things are done and looks for new options.
5. *Get accustomed to being uncomfortable.* Popular thinking is comfortable, while embracing new ways of thinking and achievement will bring discomfort.

## Shared Thinking

When people seek out and value other people's thoughts, they accomplish more than they could alone. Shared thinking is faster, more innovative, and stronger than solo thinking. The ideas that result from shared thinking benefit from more experience and result in greater value. Maxwell believes that most good ideas are the product of shared thinking. To benefit from shared thinking, there are five different things that people can do:

1. *Value others' ideas.* People who are open to the idea of shared thinking are usually emotionally secure and value the interactive process.
2. *Move from competition to cooperation.* People who enjoy cooperation want to help complete others' ideas. When the best idea wins, rather than the person who offered the idea, people are more likely to share their thoughts openly.
3. *Have an agenda for every meeting.* When Maxwell meets with a person, he always has a reason for the meeting and an expectation of what he will contribute or receive from the discussion.
4. *Get the right people around the table.* Do not choose brainstorming partners based on feelings of friendship or convenience. The right people at the table will help uncover the best ideas.
5. *Compensate good thinkers and collaborators well.* The most successful companies practice shared thinking; they look for good thinkers who value teamwork when recruiting and hiring. After employees are on the job, good organizations pay them well and ask them to share ideas often.

## Unselfish Thinking

Unselfish thinking is beneficial because it facilitates personal fulfillment, adds value to other people, and increases quality of life. When people engage in unselfish thinking, they become part of something greater than themselves. It is possible to create a long lasting legacy by thinking unselfishly and investing in others. Maxwell suggests five ways to cultivate the ability to think unselfishly:

1. *Put others first.* Unselfish thinkers make a commitment, both mentally and emotionally, to look out for others' interests.
2. *Find situations where people have needs.* One way to promote unselfish thinking is to find situations where people have needs and then do something about it. At first, the kind of giving is not important; the goal is to learn how to give.

3. *Give quietly or anonymously.* After learning how to give, one must learn how to give when nothing is provided in return. Anonymous giving results in spiritual, mental, and emotional benefits.

4. *Invest in people intentionally.* Consider different people and their journey, and then collaborate with them. One characteristic of unselfish thinkers is that they make sure the other person in a relationship wins first.

5. *Continually monitor motives.* It is human nature for people to put themselves first. It is important for individuals to examine their motives to ensure that they are not acting for selfish reasons.

*If you embrace unpopular thinking and make decisions based upon what works best and what is right rather than what is commonly accepted, know this: in your early years you won't be as wrong as people think you are. In your later years, you won't be as right as people think you are. And through all the years, you will be better than you thought you could be.*

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## Bottom-Line Thinking

In many companies, profit is the bottom line and it determines whether the organization is succeeding or not. However, money is not always the primary measure of success. One way to think of the bottom line is as the takeaway or desired result from an activity. Maxwell notes that every activity has its own unique bottom line.

Bottom-line thinking provides clarity by providing a benchmark to measure activity. Decisions also become easier when the bottom line is known. Success in the future relies on recognizing the bottom line today. Good companies make resource allocation and structuring decisions in order to achieve their bottom line. No matter what the bottom line is for an activity, it can be improved through good thinking that turns ideas into results. There are five ways that a person can learn to become a better bottom-line thinker:

1. *Identify the real bottom line.* The bottom line may be as large as an organizational mission or as focused as project objectives. Regardless of its size, the bottom line must be as specific as possible.
2. *Make the bottom line the point.* All activities within a company should be consistent with the organization's bottom line.
3. *Create a strategic plan to achieve the bottom line.* Strategic plans must be crafted so that the sum of smaller goals adds up to the company's overall bottom line.
4. *Align team members with the bottom line.* All team members should know the company's overall bottom line, as well as their specific role in attaining it.
5. *Stick with one system and monitor results continually.* The systems and processes in an organization must reinforce achievement of the bottom line.